

Civil War Book Review

Winter 2016

Article 13

Eating in the Side Room: Food, Archaeology, and African American Identity

Rachel A. Snell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Snell, Rachel A. (2016) "Eating in the Side Room: Food, Archaeology, and African American Identity," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.1.14

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss1/13>

Review

Snell, Rachel A.

Winter 2016

Warner, Mark S. *Eating in the Side Room: Food, Archaeology, and African American Identity*. University Press of Florida, \$74.95 ISBN 9780813061115

Diet, Cuisine, and the Creation of African-American Identity

Through the lens of food, Mark S. Warner's *Eating in the Side Room: Food, Archaeology, and African American Identity* demonstrates the influence of mass consumer culture on African-American diets and the role played by food in establishing African-American identity and resistance to racism and oppression. Warner couples the findings of the archaeological excavation of the Annapolis home inhabited by the Maynard and Burgess families from the 1850s to the 1990s with archaeological findings from other sites, archival research, oral history interviews, and material culture studies to reconstruct the dining culture of turn-of-the-twentieth century African-Americans in the Chesapeake region. From this context, Warner argues that "these families' daily food choices within a newly emergent mass consumer society served as a relatively safe way to express a unique outlook and history, as well as offer a subtle, yet persistent, commentary on the racist stereotypes and violence that surrounded them" (2).

The evidence from the Maynard-Burgess site reveals that the inhabitants relied heavily on the formation of private economies for their foodstuffs, including exchange networks, home production, and gathering wild resources. Animal and fish bones recovered from the site are evidence of the importance of home produce and exchange networks in providing food for the table. In fact, Warner argues that the evidence from the Maynard-Burgess site when combined with oral history accounts and comparative data from other archaeological assemblages indicates the bulk of the poultry, fowl, and fish in African-American diets in this region came not from city markets, but rather was "privately produced in their backyard or acquired through private bartering networks" (71). At the Maynard-Burgess site, the absence of deep water and nonnative species of fish indicates these remains were not found within the

commercial marketplace. Warner contends this is evidence of the importance of private economies not only for supplying the table, but also for identity formation. Her argues that food was the primary vehicle for identity formation for African-Americans in this era, allowing the Maynards, the Burgesses, and their neighbors to define themselves as *African American*. The development of extended family and friendship networks centered on food fostered the growth of a distinct African-American identity and culture.

The archaeological excavation further revealed the frequent appearance of pork on the table in the Maynard-Burgess "side room." Warner challenges the assumption that African-Americans favored pork as a low-cost alternative to beef. Rather, he argues that the consumption of pork by the Maynards and Burgesses (and other African Americans) was a form of resistance to the preference for beef in white, middle-class society, "while some might argue that a preference for pork is attributable to economic factors, a detailed examination of the archaeological, oral, and documentary record indicates that this was patently not the case. African American's consumption of pork within this region was a profound expression of an identity as separate from white society. One need only survey forms of African American self-expression as distinct as quilts, blues lyrics, orally transmitted recipes, and folk poems to see the prominence of pork in the collective black consciousness" (3). Warner presents a compelling argument that the consumption of pork was intimately connected to African-American identity in the Chesapeake region, demonstrating how "African Americans co-opted an animal that once provided slaves their daily rations, into a vibrant regional foodway" with evidence from blues lyrics, folk rhymes, quilts, and oral histories (112). He concludes that the belief that ham "beat[s] all meat" in Africa-American culture served not only to differentiate from white society, but provided a foundation for the resistance movements of the 1960s. Warner recognizes the same prevalence of pork, chicken, and fish in the Soul Food movement of the 1960s in the foods likely served in the "side room" of the Maynard-Burgess home. He argues the significance of private economies and community networks in the dining habits of these families represent the "tacit, persistent, everyday assertions of independence made by these and other African American families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century [that] helped prepare their grandchildren and great-grandchildren to mount more obvious challenges to white oppression later in the century" (131-2).

Warner's study addresses the need to better situate the experience of African-Americans within the narrative of American food history. There are numerous challenges to conducting studies of African-American history, usually related to lack of sources or other forms of historical evidence. Warner's study is not exception. Because the detailed assemblage from the Maynard-Burgess home is an anomaly, he notes it was difficult to compare his findings with other sites (74). He overcomes this potential shortcoming through the use of popular and material culture evidence along with oral histories to support his conclusions. This methodology could be of use to other scholars interested in African-American foodways or other marginalized groups.

Eating in the Side Room will not only be of interest to food historians, this text contains insights about daily life for African-Americans at the turn-of-the-twentieth century and should attract the attention of a wide-range of readers. The approachable style, the range of data, and the careful contextualization of the experience of the Maynard and Burgess families makes this text appropriate for a number of courses, including courses on African-American history, food and culture, or courses focused on the Chesapeake region or American South. Scholars of the Civil War will appreciate Warner's study for the ways his attention to food demonstrates continuity in African-American culture from slavery through the popularity of pork and the significance of community networks.

Rachel A. Snell is a Ph.D. candidate in History at the University of Maine. Her dissertation project examines printed and manuscript cookbooks and women's personal writing to create a cultural history of women's experiences in the northeastern United States and English-speaking Canada between 1830 and 1880.